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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to help second grade children expand and elaborate their sentences by using sentence expansion techniques which would provide exposure to word form classes and increase awareness and understanding of syntactic units. Nineteen children in a second grade class for the gifted were asked to write a one-page composition at the beginning of the experiment; were exposed to a series of sentence expansion techniques for eight 20-minute sessions; wrote a second composition, structured to discover how they were employing learned techniques; and after four more sessions, wrote a final unstructured one-page composition which provided information on the subordinate clause index and average clause length. Ten of the 19 children increased their subordinate clause index, and substantial gains were made in increasing sentence length. (Included in the materials are samples of children's compositions, written exercises for students, and a brief overview of the research techniques used to develop and measure syntactic complexity in writing. (Author/JM)

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CAN SECOND GRADE CHILDREN WRITE MORE COMPLEX SENTENCES?

By Tillie Hilfman, former Chicago Primary School teacher; at present an instructor at Northeastern Illinois State College in Chicago.

An action research in which an attempt was made to bring awareness of word form classes to primary grade children through a series of sentence expansion techniques in order to discover whether or not an increase in sentence length and complexity would result in their compositions.

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In order for teachers to help children produce a larger proportion of subordinate clauses in their sentences, teachers must bring to the conscious level of all children that which some children can do intuitively.

If the evidence of research on this problem is sound,(that growth is fairly steady after the fourth grade) [1] then it is probably perceptible before the fourth grade. [2]

The purpose of this study, then,was to help second grade children expand and elaborate their sentences by increasing their understanding of syntactic units, hoping that after exposure to word form classes, through the use of sentence expansion techniques, they would write longer and more complex sentences (in that order) than before exposure.

My plan included lengthening of sentences by words of coordination before attempting to introduce subordination in a step by step attempt to extend their simple three word sentences to a compound and then to a complex sentence.

Borgh and Hunt, in separate studies of recent measures in syntax, agreed that children at all age levels could expand and elaborate their sentences if teachers were trained in clause-consolidation in order that they might teach what children otherwise had to discover unaided.

Strickland, Dawson, and Greet offered several techniques for manipulating language by taking a simple sentence and expanding it through

1 Kellogg W. Hunt, "Recent Measures in Syntactic Development", Elementary English, XLIII (Nov., 1966), 733.

2 O'Donnell, Griffin, and Norris, "A Transformational Analysis of the Language of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children", Ibid

the addition of new parts, with Strickland pointing out something of relevance to this study--that children learn to recognize parts of speech through the positions the words hold in a sentence; while Dawson would have us precede writing with oral drill in small groups. Greet discussed one way for children to discover word form classes and to realize how these classes functioned in our language.

Ford, Harrell, Kean and Yamamoto, and Menyuk contributed valuable evidence in research studies on the question of the growth and development in the grammar of young children. In these four studies, a rapid increase in length of composition from year to year was noted, showing that children used more subordinate clauses in writing than in speaking. Menyuk's results suggested that children have a usable grammar system by the time they get to school and that they use syntactic signals to cue meanings of new words, thus expanding their grammar systems.

Although Pooley was not anti-grammar, he stood alone in these investigations by urging restraint in introducing formal instruction to improve speaking and composition during a child's earlier school years.

In this study a group of 18 second grade children and one first grade child were asked to write a one-page composition. Their subordinate clause index, [3] as determined by Kellogg W. Hunt, was measured.

> Hunt arrives at his index by dividing the total number of clauses, both subordinate and main, by the number of main clauses. The index is expressed as a decimal fraction and will always be 1 (for the main clause) plus whatever number of subordinate clauses are attached to it.

3 S-C-I will be my symbol for Hunt's subordinate clause index

After an S-C-I was recorded for each subject, the average clause length was determined.

> The average clause length for any body of writing, however long or short, is simply the total number of words divided by the total number of clauses. [4]

The class was then exposed to a series of sentence expansion techniques for a period of four weeks, two 20 minute sessions per week, and then asked to write a second one-page composition from which another S-C-I and Average Clause Length was measured. The second composition, however, was structured, employing some of the learned techniques in the instructions on a mimeographed paper. The intent here was to discover whether more uniform results would be obtained by limiting the conditions. [5]

After two more weeks of two 20 minute sessions per week, employing some new techniques and some review in their daily seat-work, [6] they were asked to write a final one-page composition from which a final S-C-I and Average Clause Length were measured and recorded. The final compostion, like the first, was not limited in any way.

The results of the three compostions were then compared for possible growth in complexity and length of sentence structure. In addition to the three S-C-I scores and three Average Clause Length Scores, the age and I.Q. for each subject was recorded. [7]

Sample compostions of low, average, and high maturity levels in writing were included for comparison.[8]

4. Ibid

5. See Appendix, p. 1

6. See Appendix, pp. 2-3 for some techniques used

7. See Appendix, p. 4 (Fig. 1)

8. See Appendix, pp. 5-6-7

The subjects upon whom data was gathered were 18 second grade children and one first grade child from the Decatur School on the North Side of Chicago. They were children from an average to slightly above average socioeconomic group with I.Q's ranging from 108 to 150. (The one child with the I.Q. of 150 was a first grade child working with the second grade.)

Three graphs were constructed and analyzed revealing the following results: [9]

1. 10 increased S-C-I from Jan. 31 to March 21. 52.63%
2. 6 decreased S-C-I from Jan. 31 to March 21. 31.58%
3. 3 remained the same. 15.79%
   19 total 100.00%
4. The S-C-I seemed to increase as the Average Clause Length increased and conversely.

The study provided some evidence that some second grade children can, through instruction, expand and elaborate their sentences by increasing their understanding of syntactic units.

At the second grade level, more subjects were successful in writing longer sentences than in writing subordinate clauses. However, although evidence is not conclusive, the data seemed to show a slight increase in S-C-I, which appears normal when recognizing the difficulty of obtaining a full page of writing at this age level.

Some intangible gains, however, have made this study worthwhile since the subjects were truly made aware of word form classes and were able to identify and isolate them. Their ability to read longer, more

9. Three graphs omitted here, available in original paper

complex sentences increased along with better comprehension.

Although this study was conducted with a gifted class, average and below average subjects could (at a slower pace) be given similar instruction using oral techniques; for primary school children, at any level, find it exciting and rewarding to discover how their language operates.

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FORM FOR SECOND COMPOSITION

NAME_____ ROOM 102 2nd Grade

Decatur School Date_____

WHO? DID WHAT? HOW? WHERE? WHEN? WHY?

EXPANDING A THREE WORD SENTENCE

Name_____ 102 Grade 2

Decatur Date _____

(What Kind?) (How?) (Where?)

THE dark blue CAR WENT speeding down the hill

(When?) (Why?)

this morning because it was out of gear and

the wind made it move.

Make a long train-sentence by filling in the blank spaces with words or phrases that tell what kind of car it was, how it went, where it went, when it went, and why it went.

SIMPLE TRANSFORMATIONS FROM DECLARATIVE TO INTERROGATIVE

Name_____ 102 Grade 2

Decatur Date_____

1	2	3	4	5
TOM	WAS	LATE	FOR SCHOOL	TODAY.
2	1	3	4	5 ?
WAS	TOM	LATE	FOR SCHOOL	TODAY ?

NONSENSE WORD SUBSTITUTION, SHOWING CHILDREN THAT THEY COULD RECOGNIZE WORD FORM CLASSES BY THEIR POSITIONS IN THE SENTENCE AND BY THEIR INFLECTIONAL ENDINGS.

Name_____ ___ 102 Grade 2

Decatur Date _____

The baz flig crung on the steez gooply.

The big dog jumped on the cows roughly.

(Replace nonsense words with real words in the blank spaces.)

EACH SUBJECT HAD A FOLDER IN WHICH THEY KEPT VOCABULARY CLASSIFIED:

Words For People, Animals, Things, Places We Do, Are Doing, We Did

Where? When? How? What Kind?

Little Helper Words

Subject	Age *	IQ	No. of Words			No. of Sentences			Average Clause Length			S.C.I.		
A	7-3	108	33	57	46	7	11	7	4.7	5.18	5.71	1.0	1.3	1.0
N	8-0	109	20	63	38	4	9	4	5.0	7.0	9.5	1.33	1.49	1.33
H	7-9	111	26	40	41	5	9	6	5.2	4.4	6.83	1.2	1.0	1.00
P	7-8	111	36	64	33	4	9	3	9.0	7.1	11.0	1.0	1.1	1.66
J	7-5	112	57	51	73	10	9	9	5.7	5.66	9.11	1.1	1.12	1.36
M	7-10	113	58	51	33	8	7	3	7.25	7.28	11.0	1.14	1.4	1.33
R	7-11	114	36	56	44	7	11	6	4.57	5.1	7.33	1.17	1.31	1.25
I	7-5	114	17	43	57	3	8	6	5.66	5.37	9.5	1.5	1.0	1.00
D	7-6	114	35	86	89	6	14	7	5.99	6.14	12.71	1.2	1.16	1.63
G	7-7	116	28	44	63	4	6	8	7.0	7.33	7.87	1.0	1.0	1.37
B	7-3	117	26	42	41	4	7	4	6.5	6.0	10.22	1.0	1.0	1.33
C	7-7	120	84	95	48	13	19	6	6.46	5.0	8.0	1.18	1.1	1.28
L	7-4	122	22	38	31	4	6	5	5.5	6.3	6.2	1.33	1.5	1.16
K	7-2	123	24	79	52	4	12	8	6.0	6.5	6.5	1.33	1.2	1.12
F	7-2	124	33	39	58	6	5	5	5.5	7.8	11.6	1.0	1.25	1.28
O	7-6	124	34	56	47	6	9	6	5.66	6.2	7.83	1.5	1.12	1.16
Q	7-5	125	22	49	63	5	9	8	4.4	5.44	7.87	1.25	1.12	1.25
E	7-3	127	29	41	45	4	5	3	7.25	8.2	15.0	1.33	1.5	1.16
S	6-4	150	47	71	56	6	9	4	7.83	7.88	14.0	1.0	1.5	1.57

FIG. 1.--ANALYSIS OF COMPOSITIONS OF JANUARY 31, 1967 COMPARED WITH COMPOSITIONS OF MARCH 10, 1967 (in red) AND MARCH 21 (in blue)

*Ages computed from January 31, 1967

THE THREE COMPOSITIONS OF SUBJECT (N), I.Q. 109

The Big Snow (Jan. 31, 1967)

Once I tripped in the snow and fell in a snow-blower machine. When I came home, I told my mother.

What I Would Like (March 10, 1967)

Who? Did What? How? Where? When? Why?

I like tanks because they are fun to know about, and they look like a prehistoric ant eater called the Peranadon. It is a very queer bird that looks like it has two heads that come to a point, but he really has one and he has a very long neck too! It is as big as a tank and makes the ame sound.

Spring is Here (March 21, 1967)

I like spring and I wish that the snow will melt. We have fun on spring vacation. I play games with my sister and my friends. On summer vacation I will go to Florida, so I can't wait!

THE THREE COMPOSITIONS OF SUBJECT (I) I.Q. 114

The Big Snow (Jan. 31, 1967

At my father's office we were stran[illegible] till 12:00. When we got home, we were very tired.

What I Would Like (March 10, 1967)

Who? Did What? How? Where? When? Why?

I would like to have a kitten. They are nice and fluffy. They are quiet. I would like to have one. But I have a guinea pig. Do you like a cat? I will talk for you. No, I just like a kitten.

Spring is Here

I like spring with the beautiful flowers coming up from the ground. In summer the flowers have blossoms with their sweet smell. My mother likes flowers and their sweet smell. The smell of the lilacs has a very fragrent smell.. You can smell the daisy too. That has a good smell too, but I like tulips.

THE THREE COMPOSITIONS OF SUBJECT (S) I.Q. 150

The Big Snow (Jan. 31, 1967)

In the Midwest area on Thursday a big snow started. It turned out to be 26 inches'. It was fun to play in. The first day of the big snow I let my dog out. He loved the snow. He went right ghrough the deepest part!

What I Would Like (March 10, 1967)

Who? Did What? How? Where? When? Why?

I would like an elephant, but I would also like a lion and a tiger and all the other big animals. My mother said when I get older, if I still liked animals a lot I could be a volunteer at the zoo and work with the baby animals. My mind is still on animals and I can't wait until I am old enough to volunteer and work at the zoo.

Spring is Here (March 21, 1967)

I like spring and now it is here. I know that because it is March twenty first and on March twenty first spring comes. I hope the snow melts fast so I can go to the beach. There are so many things to do in spring, so many that I probably won't know where to start.